



Media Reality ✓ Check

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TV Networks Often Develop Amnesia When Democratic Politicians Bring Embarrassment to the Party

How Disgraceful Democrats Lose the “D”

While the death and controversial life of Sen. Strom Thurmond is remembered with a mix of warmth for his longevity and disgust for his segregationist past, it’s natural for TV remembrances to include his party affiliation, since he was so recently an elected Republican leader. But when Democrats cause their party members embarrassment, either from the past or the present, TV networks often develop a very handy case of amnesia.

Lester Maddox. When news surfaced of the death of segregationist Gov. Lester Maddox (D-Georgia) on Wednesday, the networks were very shy about party labels. News readers at ABC’s *Good Morning America* and NBC’s *Today* both avoided the D-word. CNN and FNC readers also missed the label.

On Wednesday, neither ABC’s Peter Jennings nor CNBC’s Don Teague found segregationist Gov. Lester Maddox’s Democratic affiliation worth mentioning — even though both noted how in 1966, as Jennings recalled, “no candidate had a majority, and the state legislature chose Maddox.” In fact, GOP candidate Bo Calloway got more votes, but the Democrat-run legislature made Maddox the Governor.

A quick rip and read off the AP wire might be blamed: the morning dispatch by Dick Pettys didn’t get to a party label until the 19th paragraph. But the omission continued that night. Brief stories on *CBS Evening News*, and *NBC Nightly News* didn’t carry the D-word.

Even more surprising, ABC’s *World News Tonight* and CNBC’s *The News with Brian Williams* ran full stories which consumed more than two minutes each, yet neither ABC’s Peter Jennings nor CNBC’s Don Teague found Maddox’s party affiliation worth mentioning (See box).

James Traficant. On May 4, 2001, Rep. James Traficant (D-Ohio) was indicted for bribery, fraud, and racketeering. But some networks aided Democrats in trying to tum that into a GOP embarrassment. On ABC’s *World News Tonight*, reporter Linda Douglass claimed: “Traficant is a Democrat, but this indictment is actually an embarrassment to Republican leaders. They gave him \$20 million last year for a project in his district in return for his support of the Republicans.” On CNN’s *Wolf Blitzer Reports*, Blitzer asked reporter Jonathan Karl: “Jon, is this more of an embarrassment for Democrats or Republicans? He’s a Democrat who voted

for the Republican Speaker.” Karl related the same facts as ABC, but noted it as “the spin from the Democrats.”

On April 11, 2002, Traficant was convicted on all counts, and ABC, CBS, CNN, and FNC noted the party label – but not *NBC Nightly News* or *The News with Brian Williams*, then on MSNBC. On July 18, 2002, the House ethics committee voted to expel Traficant. ABC noted it with the

D-word. But NBC aired a two-minute story with no party label.

Gary Condit. Rep. Gary Condit (D-California) had an affair with intern Chandra Levy and then misled police when she disappeared (and was later found dead).

From the story’s national emergence on May 14, 2001 through July 11, ABC, CBS

and NBC morning and evening news shows aired 179 stories on Condit — 121 full-length reports or interviews, plus 58 brief anchor-read items. MRC analysts found Condit was labeled a “Democrat” only 14 times, or in fewer than eight percent of stories. Six of those labels came paired with adjectives such as “conservative” or “right-wing,” distancing Condit from other party members.

Edwin Edwards. On May 9, 2000, former four-term Gov. Edwin Edwards (D-Louisiana) was convicted on 17 counts of fraud and racketeering. *CBS Evening News* and *NBC Nightly News* passed on the news with no Democratic label. ABC *World News Tonight* anchor Peter Jennings avoided the D-word around his conviction, but later arrived at the party identification indirectly: “He got support from old line white Democrats, blacks and Cajuns. He was one of them.” If the governor had been a Republican, his affiliation would not have been such a sensitive secret. — *Tim Graham*

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